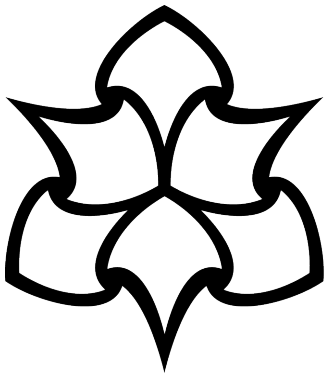

Title of review

Troubling the Power of Words…a review of Paul Michael Garrett's *Welfare Words*.

Book reviewed

Welfare words: critical social work & social policy, by Paul Michael Garrett, Sage, 2017, 288 pp., ISBN: 9781473968974, £25.99 (paperback); ISBN: 9781473968967, £79.00 (hardback).

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Raymond William's 1976 book, *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society*, became essential reading for those interested in the power of language. It focused on 110 keywords that he saw as requiring critical analysis to help us understand contemporary culture, society and politics (a further 21 were added to the second edition published in 1983). Williams was at pains to show how words that were often taken for granted, unquestioned and used uncritically, were actually embedded with social and political significance.

Political and cultural language and the significance afforded to it changes over time, the meanings behind some words change, new words enter our vocabulary and others drop from common usage. As such it is necessary to interrogate the keywords that are of significance today. This is Paul Garrett's aim with *Welfare words*. As the title implies his focus is on those keywords that are of significance to the world of social policy, social welfare and social work. As such, he differs from Williams in that rather than a broad analysis of 131 keywords, Garrett's focus is seven terms: *welfare dependency*, *underclass*, *social exclusion*, *early intervention*, *resilience*, *care*, and *adoption*. However, what we lose in breadth we gain in depth as this allows Garrett to provide a comprehensive analysis of each term, detailing the significance, hidden meanings, political uses and misuses behind terms that are ubiquitous within contemporary social welfare and social work.

Garrett starts the book with a startling example of how a change of word can lead to a change of status for a recipient of health or social care. In 2016 the Irish Health Services Executive (HSE) instructed its nursing staff to remove 'trespassing' patients who refused to surrender their beds. This switch from 'patient' to 'trespasser' was no mere semantic change, as 'HSE legal advisors stated that nurses could deploy "minimum force" in such instances to remove a "trespasser" refusing to leave a bed once deemed clinically well enough to do so' (p.1). A change of term leads to a change of status which – in this case at least – leads to patients being subject to force.

What unites both Williams and Garrett is that they both understand that it is essential to analyse keywords in the context of the social conditions in which they arise. Words do not exist in a vacuum but are embedded in webs of meaning, power and resistance that are influenced by the material circumstances of the day. Like Williams, Garrett is wary of the cul-de-sac down which many cultural and discourse theorists end up whereby they see a focus on language and the disruption of meaning as being enough to bring about social and economic change. He quotes Bourdieu who saw this as a 'typical illusion' of many academics and activists, who often regard an 'academic commentary as a political act or the critiques of texts as a feat of resistance, and experience revolutions in the order of words as radical revolutions in the order of things' (quoted on p.5).

Garrett draws on a wide range of theorists as he articulates his case, his conceptual lens being most influenced by the work of Antonio Gramsci (hegemony), Pierre Bourdieu (symbolic violence, habitus, field and capital), Lois Wacquant (welfare words and neoliberal penality), and Jacques Ranciere (welfare words, de-classification, police and politics), with Karl Marx an underlying influence throughout.

At the end of each chapter Garrett provides a 'reflection and talk box', which encourages the reader to think through what they have just read and also provides further reading for those who wish to pursue a particular area, writer or keyword in more detail.

After setting out his conceptual lens Garrett then devotes a chapter to each of his keywords, with chapters three and four examining the separate but interrelated terms of *welfare dependency* and *underclass* respectively. With regards to the former, it is noted how attitudes to welfare have changed over recent years with an increase in stigma attached to its recipients. Garrett cites a 2012 *British Social Attitudes* report that found that the percentage of people who think that the government should be mainly responsible for ensuring unemployed people have enough to live on has declined from 88% in 2001 to 59% today. In

1991 27% of people thought that unemployment benefits were too high and discouraged work, today this has more than doubled to 62%. However, as Garrett clearly describes, such attitudinal analyses should not be seen as being pure and objective accounts of the public's altered perceptions of welfare. On the contrary, such research 'can be read as a *political* intervention implicitly seeking to shape attitudes rather than merely reporting them... That is to say, public attitudes in the UK may, in large part, be a *consequence* of the mood and "structure of feeling" which politicians of the right have been striving to create' (p.65, emphasis in original). There is a resulting gap between 'social security' and 'welfare', which is read as the gap between entitlement and stigma.

Drawing on the work of Barbara Ehrenreich, Garrett points out the concern for social work is the way in which, it appears 'to varying degrees depending on the jurisdiction, to have become increasingly enmeshed in an "insidiously manipulative culture" intent on "easing" the so-called welfare-dependent into low-paid and precarious work' (pp.70-71). Of course, such criticism of social work and social welfare are far from new. Indeed many of the earliest and most astute critiques came from those on the left of the political spectrum, who highlighted how charity and social work could be used as a means of keeping the working classes at subsistence level in an attempt to maintain the prevailing political and economic system. The famous quip being from the cookery class during the Depression where the women were being taught how to make cod head soup. When asked if they had any questions one hand went up and said 'Just one, while we're having the cod head soup, who's having the cod?'

Garrett's analysis of welfare dependency leads seamlessly into the next chapter on the related term *underclass*. He first reminds us that the term did not always carry the pejorative connotations that it does today, quoting the Scottish revolutionary socialist John Maclean, who in 1918 spoke of a society moving forward as a 'consequence of an under-class

overcoming the resistance of a class on top of them'. Half a century later Gunnar Myrdal, an eminent economist, sociologist and politician, was concerned that technological and structural changes in industrial societies had 'led to the creation of an underclass of the unemployable persons and families at the bottom of a society' (quoted on p.73). As Garrett points out, in neither case was the term meant pejoratively, in the former it implied the possibility of the 'underclass' overcoming its position, in the latter it was meant to convey the very real structural problems facing industrial societies.

Ensuring the discussion does not veer too far away from social work, there follows an overview of how tragedies, such as that of Peter Connolly, the 17-month old boy killed whilst under a child protection plan, and that of Shannon Mathews, who was alleged to have been kidnapped but had actually been hidden by her mum and an accomplice, are used to stigmatise whole communities. Media reports of these and similar cases referred to an amoral underclass outwith mainstream society, often with 'subnormal intelligence' who were drawing 'decent' families into their orbit. Similar sentiments were expressed following the UK riots of August 2011. Television programmes also used the trope of the feckless amoral underclass to comedic effect, for example *Little Britain* where the character Vicky Pollard was meant to exemplify the worst excesses of the welfare dependent, feckless and promiscuous single mother. Garrett then provides a comprehensive historical, cultural and political analysis of the term, noting, in a discussion of the *Troubled Families* agenda[1], that it and the wider underclass discussion allows the focus to be on the behaviour of individuals and families rather than on the more structural forces that impact on their daily lives.

Given their ubiquity in contemporary political and cultural discourse, it is not too difficult to view terms such as welfare dependency and underclass as pejorative, as signifying

[1] The Troubled Families programme is a UK Government scheme, launched in 2011 by the Department for Communities and Local Government. It's main aim is to help 'troubled' families turn their lives around.

the exclusion of those so signified from mainstream society. However, Garrett then proceeds to detail other keywords that, at face value, can be seen to be more benign than those so far discussed, with the following five chapters focusing on *social exclusion*, *early intervention, resilience, care* and *adoption* respectively.

Social exclusion is a term that came to prominence in the years of the New Labour government from 1997-2010. The party adopted the prefix 'New' in 1994 in an attempt to distance itself from the more socialist programmes of previous years. Influenced by the work of the sociologist Anthony Giddens, it advocated a 'Third Way' between free market capitalism and socialism. It also formed a Social Exclusion Unit whose purported aim was to rectify those factors that led to people being excluded from society. In charting the usage of the term *exclusion*, Garrett notes that it originated in France, being deeply embedded in some interpretations of French revolutionary thought.

Influenced by the work of Bourdieu and Wacquant, Garrett shows how 'the politics of social ex/inclusion were not a politics intent on rebutting neoliberalism, rather they actually helped to constitute and further embed neoliberalism' (p.102). He links the current discussion with earlier ones, such as that of the 'cycle of deprivation', which became a key term within the Conservative government of the early 1970s. Multiple deprivations and social disadvantage were said to be transmitted inter-generationally, with the then Secretary of State Keith Joseph stating that 'a high and rising proportion of children are born to mothers least fitted to bring children into the world' (quoted on p.103). This has obvious links to later Conservative Party policies under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher, and also with the underclass debate discussed above.

However, it is important to note that such sentiments were not confined to the political right, and Garrett shows how New Labour adopted and expanded the term. At the launch of the Social Exclusion Unit, the then Prime Minister Tony Blair argued that social

exclusion ‘is a modern problem likely to be passed down from generation to generation’ (quoted on p.104), and the phrase ‘cycle of deprivation’ was used in the promotion of its Sure Start programme (of which more below). Garrett uses the work of Ruth Levitas, who argues that the overarching framing of the problem was one that emphasised that inequality and poverty are pathological and residual rather than endemic.

This focus on individual behaviour became a key component of the New Labour government, a top-down approach in which the poor were seen as requiring saving from themselves. I would go further than Garrett here. The Sure Start programme was not about responding to identified local need, but part of a wider form of governmentality that attempts to get communities to adopt the latest social policy fad, whether that be ‘appropriate’ parenting, smoking cessation, ‘correct’ diets etc. and imposing a top-down agenda on the masses. The effect can be that we end up with a ‘manufactured civil society’, one which no longer grows organically and responds to identified community need, but one that is manufactured elsewhere (e.g. in policy circles, local government etc.) and transposed onto the community. As Hodgson (2004, p. 157) notes, ‘manufactured civil society can be viewed as a means of controlling what happens within the community and civil society more broadly. Rather than a redistribution of power and influence, what we may be witnessing is the extension of state power via a range of social actors’. She goes on to quote one Sure Start manager who candidly explained ‘you have to *make them feel that what we are doing is what they would like us to do*’ (p.139, emphasis in original).

The chapter that focuses on adoption also presents a brief historical analysis followed by a detailed discussion of the way the issue has been politicised in recent years. We should not be surprised that the subject of adoption commands political and public attention. As Garrett points out, ‘it touches on a host of substantial and emotive issues centred on, for example, constructions of “childhood” and of children’s rights at particular junctures in

history; the rights of parents versus the rights of the state… the commodification of children and the new markets in child welfare systems, neo-colonial practices and how affluent citizens in the West relate to the "developing world"…. Moreover, the discourse on [adoption, is] laden with questions pertaining to "race"' (p.179).

As such, this chapter considers adoption from a class, gender, race and international perspective. All are interlinked, for example, many middle class couples who were not approved to adopt in the UK opted to go abroad in order to do so, which raises many ethical issues. The right-wing press often interviewed such parents who lamented the 'political correctness' that, according to them, prevented them from adopting due to being middle-class, white and heterosexual. In Bourdieusian terms they believed they had 'negative symbolic capital' when it came to the adoption process. As he does throughout the book, but particularly so here, Garrett shows how all the keywords interact with each other. For example, the underclass issue is to the fore, with the Daily Mail journalist Kate Gallagher lamenting that the names birth parents give to their children can put educated, middle-class, caring, potential adopters off. For her, these children have 'names which will mark them out for their whole lives as members of a peculiarly British underclass. Simply put, the children's names do not fit with the social demographic of the people coming forward to give them a home' (quoted on p.177). This, in addition to 'political correctness' and the slowness of social services assessment processes, are all held accountable for allowing children to languish in care homes.

The issue of transracial adoption is discussed in detail, and is related to international adoption, class and the commodification of children. Indeed, for me the most disturbing aspect of this was the commodification process, with Garrett providing examples whereby children are 'advertised' on websites for adults to peruse. Some US states have 'placement activity' days, with potential adopters being allowed to briefly meet a number of children

prior to making a decision over which, if any, of them they wish to adopt. The emotional consequences for those children not picked are unlikely to be positive.

Whilst most will agree that no child should remain in care when a good adoptive family is waiting, in their haste to do something, many politicians and policy makers can simplify a very complex process and cause further problems. It is also the case that for some children it may be better to remain in care for a longer period than be 'fast-tracked' into an unsuitable adoption. The policy imperative to increase the number and speed of adoptions has led the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) to note that 'we may well look back on this period in horror as we do now to the forcible removal of thousands of children to Australia in the 1930s, 40s and 50s without their parents' knowledge or consent' (quoted on p.187).

Once again Garrett connects the issue with wider structural and political factors that are rarely addressed in governmental or policy circles. For example, if there are more black and minority ethnic children in care then *why* is this the case? As he points out, the failure to address issues related to questions of 'race', class and power means that they are eased from the analytical frame.

A similar analysis is undertaken in relation to *care* and *resilience*. The gendered, class and international element of care is well documented, for example in the way that care is predominantly a female activity, and that due to the cost of living many couples need two wages, which often then leads to the contracting out of care, often to a migrant from a less economically developed part of the world. Likewise in relation to resilience Garrett quotes Kristina Diprose who argues that it appears to be an 'inducement to putting up with precarity and inequality and accepting the deferral of demands for change' (quoted on pp.151-152), before going on to conclude that 'resilience talk' can therefore 'be interpreted as rooted in a

more pervasive omnipresent and evolving programme of neoliberal and cultural transmission' (p.152).

What I found most striking about this book was the way Garrett shows the changing meanings of keywords over time and in relation to wider social developments. Many terms now used to maintain a neoliberal agenda and societal status quo, often had more progressive and, often, revolutionary meaning behind them. Such an insight should alert us to the need not to take any term at face value but interrogate it in order to discover what it signifies at any historical juncture and particular social context. Garrett has provided us with a valuable analysis of the language of welfare and of the political uses and misuses of keywords that are ubiquitous within the field of social welfare, social policy, social work and the wider public. I highly recommend it for all levels of study within such disciplines as well as those of politics, sociology, media and cultural studies. It is also required reading for academics and politically engaged members of the public, indeed anyone with an interest in understanding contemporary society.

References

Hodgson, L., 2004. Manufactured civil society: counting the cost. *Critical Social Policy*, 24(2), 139-164.